

Lord Of The Lost look to cover themselves in glory

LORD OF THE LOST

Weapons Of Mass Seduction

NAPALM

Industrial goth mischief-makers toy with the classics on their covers album

GERMANY'S LORD OF The Lost lived up to their name at Eurovision 2023, limping home in last place. And that's fine. The five-piece thrust their sparkling gimp-sticks into millions of homes, driving curious ears toward eight records packed with gothic industrial, symphonia and lovelorn litanies. Never to waste an opportunity, they've since

“THEY LINGER IN THEIR COMFORT ZONE OF SPOOPY ROCK”

lapped stadiums supporting Iron Maiden, now consolidating their gains with... a covers album. Are they flushing all that blood and glitter down the shitter? Yes and no. This isn't Imperial Triumphant pretending to know Metallica's *Motorbreath* and just doing jazzy death metal instead. Rather, Lord Of The Lost linger in their comfort zone – these are all massive tunes, easily transposed to their spooey, keyboard-laden rock template.

Billy Idol's *Shock To The System* does as the title suggests, if only because it's not *White Wedding* or *Rebel Yell*. Frontman Chris Harms delivers the curled-lip charm of 90s Idol, filtered through his boss-level

baritone; it's sleaze, sex, soße. Niklas Kahl gets up to all sorts of rototomfoolery behind the kit, dispensing comically 80s percussion with abandon. It's this cheekiness, this unbridled glee, that transforms Keane's *Somewhere Only We Know* into more than a soundtrack for break-ups and Christmas adverts. We're not talking Spider God levels of defiling Whitney Houston with black metal, but it undoubtedly winks and nudges around those milieus of piss-taking. That, or the band have zero self-awareness.

Scrutinising the album's functionality in this fashion rends it wonky, though. Bronski Beat's gay anthem *Smalltown Boy* already got the sad goth treatment from Paradise Lost two decades ago; when LOTL's Chris parps a piercing, Devin



And that's the rub: they've happened upon tracks initially sung by superstars. LOTL's twinkly industrial is polished, streamlined yet spacious, demanding their frontman to lead. When the stuff he's orating was first recorded by Halford, Midge Ure, and The King Of Pop/Questionable Chimp Owner Michael Jackson, he's banking for a spanking. This uncanny hollowness rings across newer tracks, too. LOTL seem pretty stoppable during Sia's *Unstoppable*, less a Porsche with no brakes and more a Fiat with shagged

ALEC CHILLINGWORTH



Depths

PROSTHETIC

DOM LAWSON



The Path Of Decoherence

UPRISING

Eight years and two EPs since their formation, Advocacy's debut album has been a long time coming. Always wanting to push themselves and the boundaries of progressive metal, the five-piece have gone heavier and more

**ELLIOT LEAVER**

Limitless

ARISING EMPIRE

11/11/2016

STEPHEN HILL

Bright & Black find the classical/metal suite spot



BRIGHT & BLACK

The Album

SELF RELEASED

Apocalyptica, Meshuggah and Watain members help score a classical marvel

EVER SINCE EDDIE Van Halen revolutionised guitar playing with a style derived from his boyhood training as a pianist, metal's ties to classical music have been evident to anyone paying attention. That's never more so than in extreme metal, where the various layers of contrasting complexity are the sound of orchestral sections distilled into guitars, drums and bass. Bright & Black seek to herald this legacy, asking a stellar array of metal musicians to compose for the Baltic Sea Philharmonic orchestra, with – for obvious reasons – Apocalyptica's Eicca Toppinen as their soloist.

This fierce ensemble is conducted by the innovative Kristjan Järvi, who's made a career of pushing the limits of what modern classical can be. The results are frequently startling. *Bloodgrind*, composed by Entombed AD's Nico Elgstrand, is death metal without the distortion, carried on a pumping beat. Even the harsh vocals are emulated through grinding percussion, to surprisingly effective results. Eicca's *Collateral Damage* is cinematic in scope,

its graceful strings interspersed with the kind of score that usually bolsters epic silver screen confrontations. Erik Danielsson offers an emotive lament in the form of *Mounts Of Misfortune*. Bold and rousing, it highlights the fervent passion that has long fuelled Watain. Meshuggah's Tomas Haake and Dick Lövgren's signature rhythmic puzzles are instantly recognisable on *Armies Of The Preposterous*.

Suffice to say, this is a fascinating interpretation of a genre that many in

the classical world would disregard as lowbrow, when it has in fact been pushing the boundaries of what's possible with multi-layered musical composition for decades. Metal took classical music's torch and ran with it, making this an album more important to classical music than it is metal. We've known for ages what this music's capable of; let's hope *The Album* opens more ears and eyes to the possibilities.

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FOR FANS OF: Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Emperor, Ayreon

TOM O'BOYLE



BLOOD RED THRONE

Nonagon
SOULSEILER

Kristiansand's prolific killers undergo a dark revolution

Norway's death metal scene favours quality over quantity, but Blood Red Throne have cleverly managed both over the last 25 years. With a new vocalist, Sindre Wathne Johnsen, their 11th album feels like a significant reset. The myopic brutality of early classics like *Altered Genesis* remains a predatory force, but this is a more measured litany of violent acts. If 2021's *Imperial Congregation* was the big label blowout, Nonagon is the defiant return to the underground, wherein slower tempos and jarring flashes of black metal offset the production's modernist crunch. The deeply trippy *Split Tongue Sermon* and grim finale *Fleshrend* hint at more adventurous sounds to come, and *Ode To The Obscene* is a perfect blur of haughtiness and hate.

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FOR FANS OF: Vomitory, Benediction, Frozen Soul

DOM LAWSON



CALIGULA'S HORSE

Charcoal Grace
INSIDEOUTMUSIC

Australian progressive metallers find new resonance in the familiar

Thirteen years in, this Brisbane quartet are best recognised within the realm of progressive metal, and yet they've perfected a sound that weaves several differing styles, including alt rock and metal, into

something unique. Album six relives the fear and uncertainty brought on by Covid. If that subject's started to become a little wearisome, Caligula's Horse summon emotional depth and immense musical and compositional skill to create something of genuine resonance and beauty. From 10-minute opener *The World Breathes With Me* to its majestic title cut – 24 minutes and four suites that seem to fly by in a jiffy – *Charcoal Grace* is a masterclass in light and shade, power and subtlety.

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FOR FANS OF: Haken, Leprous, Tesseract

DAVE LING



CARIOSUS

Will, Until Beauty
SELF-RELEASED

Melodeath/deathcore young bucks throw down all their aces

Ten years in, Chicago duo Cariosus are clearly sick of waiting for the industry to notice them and have self-released their debut album. *Will, Until Beauty*, according to the band, draws from death, black and neo-classical influences, while it explores the recesses of the human psyche. The eight songs actually form a fusion of deathcore and melodeath: a mixture that may be comparable to The Black Dahlia Murder and Whitechapel when it comes to exhilaration, but also feels fully exhausted by the end of these 35 minutes. Although *Will, Until Beauty* is entertaining in its own right, Cariosus will have to pull from new pastures if they want listeners to come back for album number two.

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FOR FANS OF: Whitechapel, The Black Dahlia Murder, Suicide Silence

MATT MILLS



Children Of Bodom
retire in glory.

CHILDREN OF BODOM

***A Chapter Called Children Of Bodom: The Final Show
In Helsinki Ice Hall 2019***

SPINEFARM

Finnish melodic metal icons bow out in untouchable form

WHEN ALEXI LAIHO disbanded Children Of Bodom in 2019, then passed away just 12 months later, it left a chasm that no metal band – no matter how flamboyant, talented or charismatic – have filled since. The Wildchild was a once-in-a-lifetime rock star within extreme metal. Plus, his guitar playing's trade-offs with keyboardist Janne Wirman were so impressive and fun that few have even dared to replicate them. All of the idiosyncrasies that made both Alexi and his band great have now been immortalised on *A Chapter Called Children Of Bodom*; the recording of the last live show the Finns ever played.

The end of Bodorn was effectively foreshadowed weeks before this December 2019 gig, with Janne, drummer Jaska Raatikainen and bassist Henkka Seppälä all announcing their exits in November. That the line-up was able to sustain itself for this finale – let alone make it such a triumphant, valiant send-off – says everything about their commitment to being one of metal's most endearingly bombastic forces.

Under Grass And Clover, from 2019's swansong album *Hexed*, instantly flaunts Alexi and Janne's neo-classical chops. After the two exchange fanciful melodies, the more upfront *In Your Face* declares, 'I don't give a fuck, motherfucker!' symbolising the blunt-force intensity of modern classic Hate Crew *Deathroll*.

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It's the concert's closing half-hour, however, that truly shows Bodom at their best. Follow *The Reaper*, *Deadnight Warrior*, *Needled 24/7*, *Hate Me!*, *Hate Crew*, *Deathroll*, *Lake Bodom* and

Downfall form a series of hits from the band's golden age – and each one reinforces with bulletproof strength the all-adrenaline songwriting that made the band megastars. That nonstop excellence makes Alexi's closing farewell all the more heartbreaking in hindsight. Even on their final night as a band, Children Of Bodom were peerless in the field of infectious, exuberant and unabashedly rowdy metal music.

FOR FANS OF: Arch Enemy, Necrophobic, In Flames

MATT MILLS



EXOCRINE

Legend

SEASON OF MIST

French virtuosos summon another broken from the outer realms

Rewarded for consistently startling, envelope-pushing albums, this Bordeaux quartet have saved their best for their Season Of Mist debut. *Legend* is bigger and more experimental than even previous efforts *Maelstrom* and *The Hybrid Suns*. Whether it's *The Altar Of War*'s wall of sound or the jazz trumpet permeating the title track's dizzying labyrinth, each song possesses ferociously heavy riffs and cranium-imploding skill. Yet what sets Exocrine apart among the tech-death elite is their penchant for subversive melodic hooks that add a palpable potency to *Dragon* and epic finale *By The Light Of The Pyre*, which traverses strings, light-speed riffing, Herculean percussion and evocative twin leads.

FOR FANS OF: Archspire, Gorod, Beyond Creation

ADAM BRENNAN



HIRAES

Dortman

1994

Melodeath up-and-comers don't escape the shadow of the greats

On their 2021 debut album, *Solitary*, Hiraes lived firmly if capably in the shadow of melodeath favourites such as Arch Enemy. On their follow-up, the five-piece are still entrenched in convention and cliché. The flourishes they've introduced – the odd

electronic beat and melodically sung verse – are little more than window dressing. Opening track *Through The Storm* could convincingly be a b-side from the latest Arch Enemy album, while *Undercurrents*' lyrics – *'The thing that I regret, is what I haven't said!'* – are cringe-inducingly bland. Whatever Hiraes try next needs to be a bold diversion if they don't want to go down as also-rans.

FOR FANS OF: Arch Enemy, Dark Tranquillity, Inermum

MATT MILLS

**LINNEA HJERTÉN**

Nio Systrar

HÖRNVIS PRODUKTION

Ritualistic ambient super-heroics
from the Swedish hinterlands

With her debut solo album, singer and sound engineer Linnea Hjertén marks herself out as a formidable talent. A whisper compared to the goth-boshed doom she plays as a member of Shaam Larein, *Nio Systrar* is nevertheless a bold statement. The nine tracks come together like a cocoon of spun glass, Hjertén's languageless vocal performance – recorded in a closet, no less – entwining with organic ebb-and-flow drones in a way that evokes everything from battle hymns to lullabies. If there's fault to be found, it's that things occasionally err towards strangely familiar 'funeral of a beloved superhero' cinematics. It's a minor quibble, though, and one that does nothing to diminish a significant and often startling achievement.

FOR FANS OF: Anna von Hausswoiff, Heilung, Forndom

ALEX DELLER



THE INFERNAL SEA

Heffner
CANDLELIGHT

Historically minded black metallers take on the Witchfinder General

Three years after their superb *Negotium Crucis* album, masked marauders The Infernal Sea return with the Olde English-inspired *Hellfenlic*. Telling the story of the infamous Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins, the UK quartet play their brand of black'n'roll to chart his rise and fall in brutal detail. The serrated guitars of *Frozen Fen* are suitably chilling, the savagery of *Bastard Of The East* suggests just how formidable Hopkins was, while the groove-laden classic metal of *Witchfinder* and wistful folk metal of the stirring *Messenger Of God* add textures and a range not heard from them before. This is also the cleanest they've ever sounded, and while that takes away some of what made their prior albums so vital, it's still an impassioned and intriguing history lesson from the plague doctors of BM.

FOR FANS OF: Wode, Dawn
Ray^d, 1914

JACK TERRY



LORD DYING

Clandestine Transcendence
MNRK HEAVY

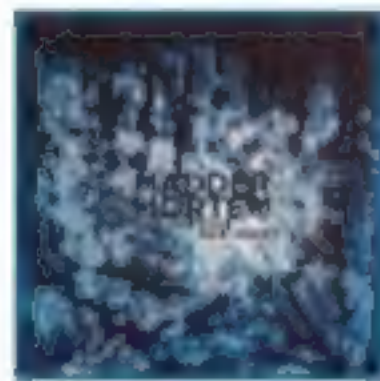
**Portland's sludge digester
unleash a new, progressive strain**

After two full-on sludge albums, the surprising classic rock leanings of 2019's *Mysterium Tremendum* were a huge, if not quite fully mastered, leap forward for Lord Dying.

Five years later, they're clearly enjoying their genre-crossing ride with more confidence. It's most noticeable in the weird mid-album sequencing, where they switch effortlessly from *Final Push Into The Sun*'s hardcore-styled aggression to the 90s Rush-reminiscent *Dancing On The Emptiness*, boosted by Kurt Ballou's organic production. But while they excel at both throughout these 12 songs, their joy in performing eight-minute mini-epics with harmonised vocals and instant hooks suggest they're ready to leave their caveman tendencies behind for good and cross a threshold. And maybe they should.

FOR FANS OF: Mastodon,
Kylesa, Rush
OLIVIER BADIN

OLIVIER LADIN



MADDER MORTEM

Old Eyes, New Heart
DARK ESSENCE

Norway's dark metal mavericks continue to dazzle

Despite having delivered several classic albums during their 26-year existence, Madder Mortem seem cursed to be criminally undervalued. The Norwegians' esoteric blend of huge, alt-inclined riffs and ornate, emotionally dynamic melodies is certainly esoteric, but even the strangest songs on *Old Eyes*, *New Heart* have insidious, slow-burning hooks. As ever, the key to the band's melodramatic power lies in Agnete M. Kirkevaag's miraculous vocal performances, and her ability to make uproarious, art metal assaults like *Coming From The Dark* and *Master Tongue* sound both intimate and theatrical. From the noirish blues

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throb of *On Guard* to the defiant, big rock roar of *Towers*, every song takes a subversive turn or two, while also packing the kind of emotional punch that necessitates major dental work. Another triumph from a fearless musical force.

FOR FANS OF: *Oceans Of Slumber*, *Atrox*, *The Gathering*

DON LAWSON



MASTER
Saints Dismissed

Saints Dispelled
HAMMERHEART
Death metal's maverick OG plays
to a new set of struggles

As a founding father of death metal, but always at a slight remove from the rest of the scene, Paul Speckmann has maintained an enigmatic presence in the extreme metal underground for more than 40 years. Relocating from Chicago to the Czech Republic after the millennium, the imperious frontman at last established a stable Master line-up, lasting nearly 20 years until a recent change of drummer. This injection of new blood seems to have had a revitalising effect. *Saints Dispelled* proves more colourful and animated than 2018's *Vindictive Miscreant*, egging up the rock'n'roll spirit and reconnecting with their Motörhead influences to produce a sound less caustic and brutal, but wilder and more organic. Paul's singular force of personality gets ever more eccentric on endearingly quirky melodies like *Find Your Life*, sounding less barbaric death/thrash, more 80s videogame soundtrack.

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FOR FANS OF: Obituary,
Autopsy, Massacre
CHRIS CHANTLER

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FROSTBITE ORCKINGS

The Orcish Eclipse

METALVERSE

AI-generated outfit fail to rewrite the fantasy metal code

WHEN IT COMES to the enduring image of man vs machine, *The Terminator's* 'human skull getting crushed by a robot foot' takes some beating. But what James Cameron didn't – and perhaps couldn't – show us was the fact that when the machines rise up, they'll do it dressed as orcs. Singing jaunty second-rate Amon Amarth songs. Oh, the inhumanity.

Billed as the world's first AI-generated metal album, there will be suspicion levelled at Frostbite Orckings' *The Orcish Eclipse*. And we get it; even the name sounds more like keyword generation than the cheesy-but-effective, erm, elegance of Dragonforce or Hammerfall.

On its own merits, *The Orcish Eclipse* plays out like an oh-so-faithful take on epic sword-and-board metal championed by European bands such as Amon Amarth, Brothers Of Metal and so many other dresser-uppers. But while the likes of *Orcs Don't Cry* and *Into The Void* are whimsical and bring the bombast that fans of those same bands will likely appreciate, tracks such as *Hammers High* are so shamelessly derivative that it borders on the offensive.

Therein lies the rub: Frostbite Orckings are an entity that is destined to imitate. While the songs (generally) aren't so bad as to consign them to the bottom of the bargain bin – though daft Europop-flavoured closer *Endless Love* comes close – they also lack the inherent glee of a manic Johan Hegg beating the shit out of a gigantic sea serpent that drives home the sense that the music means something to those making it.

In a year when AI debates helped bring Hollywood to a halt, it's difficult to imagine how much of an impact the existence of a band like Frostbite Orckings – and the wider 'Metalverse' – will have on heavy metal, but right now we'll stick with people in rubber suits all the same.

FOR FANS OF: Amon Amarth, Warkings, Ensiferum
RICH HOBSON

RICH HOBSON



Saxon are on a mission to perdition

SAXON
Hell, Fire And Damnation

SILVER LINING MUSIC

Brit metal veterans keep their wheels of steel turning

2022'S CARPE DIEM saw Saxon breach the UK album chart Top 20 for the first time since 1984's *Crusader*, but it didn't mark a huge resurgence. They've had the odd dip, of course, but Saxon never went away and, over the course of an impressive 23-album back catalogue, they've retained a remarkable consistency. They have their own place in metal history, an established fanbase and an instantly recognisable sound. On album 24 they're not likely to be presenting anything jaw-droppingly different, so the main question *Hell, Fire And Damnation* has to answer is whether it succeeds on the band's own terms.

The answer is a resounding yes. Over the years, Saxon have dabbled in grandiose power metal and close-to-speed-metal bangers. The core remains the same mid-paced fists-in-the-air anthems they've been forging since their NWOBHM glory days, however, and it's a format they've now honed to perfection. The album starts with a spoken-word intro that strays perilously close to Spinal Tap's *Stonehenge*, but does get automatic



awesome points by dint of being delivered by Brian Blessed. The opening title track begins with surprising shades of Metallica's *Creeping Death* before Biff Byford issues a scream and it settles into the sort of riff-driven metallic rocker that influenced Lars Ulrich and co in the first place.



Elsewhere, they deliver musical and lyrical history lessons with the likes of *Madame Guillotine, 1066* and *Kubla Khan And The Merchant Of Venice*. Get Saxon, Iron Maiden and Sabaton together and you

could put together a full curriculum. *Fire And Steel* appears to celebrate Sheffield in the spark-showering vein of *Princess Of The Night*, while *There's Something In Roswell* rides a chugging groove and singalong hooks that grip like an *Alien Facehugger*. It won't change the face of music or knock the world off its axis, but *Hell, Fire And Damnation* is yet another damned fine addition to Saxon's ever-expanding catalogue.

FOR FANS OF: Judas Priest, W.A.S.P., Iron Maiden

PAUL TRAVERS



SUPER PINK MOON

Inertia

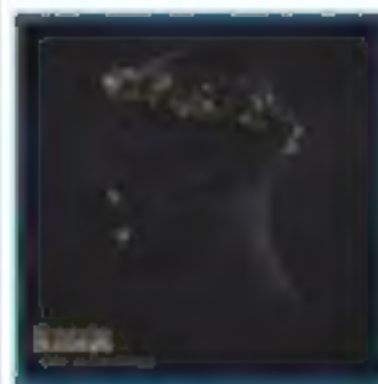
SELF-RELEASE

Anxiety-stricken meditations from the Ukrainian frontlines

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the largest European refugee crisis since World War II. The feeling of helplessness to meaningfully intervene is maddening. *Inertia*, the state of things remaining unchanged, is a perfect title to sum up those feelings of frustration. Since 2019, Somali Yacht Club's Ihor Pryshliak has used *Super Pink Moon* as an expression of his anxiety as a Ukrainian citizen. Opener *Eventually* juxtaposes dream-like melodic singing with discordant distorted chords, evoking the forays into blissful noise that Deftones adopted on their self-titled 2003 album. *Lost*, meanwhile, is a languid and luscious meditation. A beautiful record birthed by calamitous acts.

FOR FANS OF: Deftones, Jesu, Somali Yacht Club

RENFRY DEDMAN



TENSIDE

Come Alive Diving

PORTCHWYR

Textonic modern metalcore outfit
Keep most of their cards in the pack:

Tenside make raw, hard-hitting metalcore — they just haven't worked out how to make it exciting. *Come Alive Dying* has thrashing riffs, clamorous blastbeats and gristly gutturals, but it all congeals into a formless glob. While *Shadow To Shine*, *Impending Doom* and *Transcend* are

onslaughts of howling adrenaline, they can be quickly slung aside to join the ever-growing 'modern metalcore' pile. Tech-tinged closer *Dust Of The Bereaved* does end things on an echoing, optimistic note, allowing Tenside's polished production to shine. While *Come Alive Dying* fails to stand out from the crowd, Tenside have potential.

FOR FANS OF: Killswitch Engage, Flt For A King, Trivium

EMILY SWINGLE

**THERION**

Leviathan III

NAFAM

Swedish symphonic metal masters round out their conceptual trilogy

Christofer Johnsson, Therion's mastermind for 35 years, concludes the epic splurge of material he amassed in lockdown. This is the last chapter in the *Leviathan* trilogy, announced as the more versatile entry after two albums of concertedly archetypal, even self-referential, pop-savvy symphonic metal 101. Actually, it's still pretty safe, trad Therion, playing to their many strengths, if more of a journey than its predecessors. Opening traces of vituperative Swedish DM co-exist with acoustic folk, stadium rock, musical theatre, emotive operatics, horror soundtrack choirs, dextrous prog-metal riffs and heroic squealing solos. This feels like the most satisfyingly rounded, expansive *Leviathan* set, with something here for everyone – if Therion fatigue hasn't set in after three similar albums in as many years.

FOR FANS OF: Nightwish, Amorphis, Epica

CHRIS CHANTLER

